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UC-4082

ASBESTOS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Medical Advisory Panel

FROM: Director General

OUR REF.: AIA/4/4/PR

6 December 1984

SOME STATEMENTS & COMMENTS ON THOSE STATEMENTS

Please refer to Annex B to the Minutes of the 12th meeting of the Medical Advisory Panel held on 17/18 September 1984.

I attach a copy of a paper "Answers to Difficult Questions" which, although it was drawn up in 1979, may be helpful in your consideration of Annex B to the Minutes "Some Statements and Comments on those Statements".

TNStack

Sir Neville Stack

RECEIVED
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H. C. LEWINSOHN, M.D.

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ANSWERS TO DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

QUEST. 1

Asbestos is a highly dangerous material.
It is a carcinogen for which there is no safe lower limit.
It has killed and will continue to kill large numbers of people.
Many thousands will die.

ANSWER 1

Put this way, these statements naturally make the call for a ban on asbestos seem plausible.. Let us put the question another way: should we ban every material, product or substance which presents any kind of danger wherever and whenever it is used ?

Should we ban fire, lead, mercury, electricity, or coal-gas because of the inevitable risks arising from their use ?

From the earliest times, humans have had to use dangerous substances and learn to live safely with them.

Most of these materials involve benefits as well as risks : many plants are both poisonous and useful; which depends on the conditions under which they are used. Nature is a lavish provider of such "good and bad" substances. One of the greatest challenges for mankind has been to control his use of such materials, in order to exploit their benefits and avoid their dangers.

Asbestos has to be considered in such a context : how to use it in order to take advantage of its specific qualities : against fire, friction, etc.. without risking human health. Thus, the real question, bearing in mind that only the dust affects health, becomes: how can we protect people against asbestos dust ?

This can be managed in several ways :

1.- The asbestos industries can produce a large series of dust-free products.

2.- Over 60 % of the world's consumption of asbestos already consists of products (such as asbestos cement) in which the fibre is "locked in".

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3.- Discontinuation of applications which allow the emission of dust (such as spraying and air-filtration) where dust emission cannot be kept under strict control.

4.- Machining of asbestos-containing products demands the use of special tools which avoid dangerous dust emissions. Such tools are already available.

5.- Asbestos factories, where dust emission cannot be totally avoided, employ strict measures of protection through dust-exhaust systems and measures of control.

Finally, it must be remembered that some of the adverse affects due to asbestos dust (specially, lung cancer or mesothelioma), have appeared relatively recently. Cases occuring today are the result of exposure many years ago when these risks were unknown.

A ban on asbestos today would not prevent the onset of disease among workers who have been over-exposed in the past. But work with asbestos under today's controlled conditions makes the risk of contracting these diseases as a result minimal.

QUEST. 2

Even a low dose -or working only for a few hours with asbestos- may represent sufficient exposure to be fatal.

ANSWER 2

As a rule a low dose or a few hours work with asbestos will not be fatal. But individual susceptibility may be a factor, so that it is theoretically impossible to rule out the possibility completely.

QUEST. 3

There is asbestos everywhere : in the home, in the streets, in offices, in work places. So everyone is at risk.

ANSWER 3

Yes, there is asbestos everywhere, it is a mineral and occurs naturally, even, for example, in spring water and mountain air. Asbestos products undisturbed and properly sealed in buildings and domestic products containing asbestos properly used do not create levels of asbestos fibre in the atmosphere which place the public at risk. At the workplace the use of asbestos is subject to regulations which are designed to protect employees' health, and the asbestos industry aims to reduce the fibre dust content of air in its factories to the lowest possible level. The public is not at risk if asbestos is properly used.

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QUEST. 4

The public is at risk from asbestos liberated from asbestos building materials and brake linings.

ANSWER 4

Measurements of the amount of asbestos fibre in the atmosphere in buildings in the construction of which asbestos has been used have revealed infinitesimally small and therefore insignificant levels. Similar measurements taken in busy traffic-laden city streets have shown the amounts of asbestos fibre released to be equally insignificant.
Indeed, tests taken on behalf of the US Government have shown that the amount of asbestos in the dust emitted by brakes when driving is rarely more than 1 % and normally averages about 0,2 %. Asbestos is used in buildings to protect the occupants from fire, and in brakes to protect lives, since its use promotes efficient stopping power, strength and heat resistance.

QUEST. 5

The amount of asbestos found in people's lungs today is higher than it was in 1948 and is apparently increasing. Even if the amount is insignificant today, sooner or later it will not be.

ANSWER 5

There is certainly not enough evidence from comparative studies to claim that the asbestos burden in urban dwellers' lungs is increasing. The amount of asbestos fibre has increased in the past thirty years, but where it is used the measures taken in recent years to contain emissions of fibre and to prevent their escape to the surrounding atmosphere lessen the possibility of finding significantly more fibre in the lungs in the future. Tests made in the urban atmosphere have recorded the presence of asbestos in amounts at least 1,000 times below those regarded as occupationally acceptable.

QUEST. 6

Because of the subtle nature of cancers, the difficulties of diagnosis, and other factors, many more people die from asbestos exposure than we think.

ANSWER 6

It is probable that some cases of asbestos disease are undiagnosed, but the extent of medical alertness to the asbestos risk is now so great, as a result of the coverage both in popular and professional medical media, that asbestos disease is less likely to be overlooked nowadays than it might have been in the past.

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QUEST. 7

It is dangerous to work in asbestos plants.

ANSWER 7

There is no totally safe industry. In asbestos plants which observe today's standards of industrial hygiene, there should not be an unacceptable risk.

QUEST. 8

Asbestos should be banned. It can easily be replaced.

ANSWER 8

The use of asbestos should not be banned, though it should be properly controlled by regulations, because it cannot be easily replaced. Industry is continuously striving to improve the quality of its products, and is actively investigating the development and application of alternative materials. In this connection, however, it is emphasised that such materials must meet three basic requirements :

a.- they must present less hazard to health than the asbestos product;

b.- they must offer equivalent technical properties, notably in the way of fire protection and in terms of thermal and chemical resistance and mechanical strength;

c.- they must be economically satisfactory.

QUEST. 9

Blue is a special danger.

ANSWER 9

There is no evidence that blue is more likely than other types of asbestos fibre to cause asbestosis.
Many scientists are of the opinion that blue asbestos (crocidolite) is more likely to cause cancer than white (crysotile).
In some countries, the tendency is not to distinguish one sort from an other in this respect and therefore to give one homogeneous value to the TLV (BRD - Switzerland - Austria and France Germany, USA)

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QUEST. 10

Families of workers are at risk.

ANSWER 10

There have been a few cases of members of asbestos workers'families contracting mesothelioma, as a result, it is thought, of inhaling fibres brought home on work clothes or overalls. The circumstantial evidence is that the amount of fibre on the clothes was certainly not minimal. Where it is forbiden to bring overalls home, and where employers insist on a controlled change of clothing, this risk to the family is obviated.

QUEST. 11

Drinking water is contaminated by asbestos-cement pipes.

ANSWER 11

There is no evidence that the human ingestion of the tiny amounts of asbestos fibre found in water supplies is related to gastro-intestinal cancer or any other disease in the general public. Most authorities (FAO/IARC) accept that the feeding of massive doses of asbestos to animals has not produced gastro-intestinal cancers, though there has been a slight excess of gastro-intestinal cancer among heavily exposed asbestos workers. A report by the American Water Works Foundation state

> "No firm evidence shows that the proper use of asbestos-cement pip poses a hazard to health by reason of ingestion of asbestos fibres Calculations comparing the probable ingestion exposure in occupational groups to that likely to occur as a result of ingestion of potable water from asbestos-cement pipe systems suggests that the probability of risk to health from the use of such systems is small - approaching zero".

Studies are still being undertaken to confirm this.

QUEST. 12

Industry measuring methods and figures do not report the very fine fibres which are invisible in the light microscope and are the most dangerous.

ANSWER 12 : Data are expected from Dr Robock and other sources.

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